Good Afternoon.

Winston Churchill is alleged to have said, “Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen.” I think my courage is being tested on both sides of that equation today, but right now I think I prefer the latter expression to the former.

Nevertheless, I am deeply gratified by the warm and welcoming reception that Elva and I have received in accepting the honor and responsibility of becoming the eighth president of Jamestown Community College. For me, and hopefully for all of us, today’s inaugural events are convened in recognition of all that is significant about Jamestown Community College. These ceremonial proceedings are intended as a celebration of the progress and contributions – past, present, and future – of this great institution of higher learning.

Allow me to take a few moments to honor and recognize those who have so graciously taken the time out of their busy schedules to join this celebration. I would specifically like to acknowledge Board Chair, Wally Huckno, and all the members of the JCC Board of Trustees who are here today. Thank you for the trust and confidence you have expressed to me in extending this appointment. I also appreciate the attendance of Johanna Duncan-Poitier who was introduced earlier. As the SUNY Senior Vice Chancellor for Community Colleges, Johanna is a strong advocate for our cause at the state system level. I have appreciated her friendship and enthusiasm over the last several months.

I am likewise grateful for government and civic leaders, as well as college and university presidents and their delegates who have been introduced to you and are here to share in this memorable experience. I am deeply grateful for the large number of faculty, staff, and students who have so graciously welcomed us into the JCC fold, and for their willingness to give up a beautiful autumn Friday afternoon to sit through yet another meeting on campus.

I would like to extend special recognition to the members of my family and several of my friends who have traveled from Utah and Michigan to be here. I would like to ask my family, in particular, to please stand and be recognized. My mother and all five of my children, one grandson, and my sister-in-law were able to be in attendance today. There are nine other grandchildren and three in-law spouses and many others who may be viewing these proceedings by Internet transmission. I am overwhelmed by the love and constant support they consistently share with me. Thank you so much.

I would also like to recognize those who have so thoughtfully planned and produced today’s inaugural events, in particular the Inaugural Committee under the capable direction of Dr. Eileen Goodling, with committee members Marsha Hern, Cindy Pascatore, Ann Nelson, Kim Irland, Bridget Johnson, and Elva Duckworth. I also express my appreciation to all the others at the college who have offered their time and talents to make today’s events so meaningful.

I am particularly grateful that my good friend, mentor, and exemplar, Dr. William A. Sederburg, could join us today. A true friend and mentor has the ability to see the buried seeds of potential within us and the willingness to take a chance in nourishing those seeds without the benefit of knowing to what end they might eventually blossom.
On three distinct occasions, Dr. Sederburg thoughtfully cultivated the soil of my career progression. In the first instance, he offered me an appointment as Vice President of Institutional Advancement and Marketing at Ferris State University. He then took perhaps a larger risk in allowing me to switch career tracks, when he offered me a position as Vice President of Student Affairs at Utah Valley University. In the eight and half years we worked together, we were able to find important resources for the institutions we served, build buildings and programs, and further extend education and leadership opportunities to thousands of students.

In our last project together, Dr. Sederburg, then serving as the Utah Commissioner of Higher Education, invited me to work as the chief negotiator in merging Utah State University and the College of Eastern Utah – a task where others had tried and failed on two earlier occasions. The primary goal was to provide security for, and hope to, a financially strapped community college located in eastern Utah. This time, we were able to succeed, but more importantly, for me, this is the event which brought to full bloom my heartfelt conviction of the tremendous value and importance of protecting and extending the mission of our nation’s community colleges.

In addition to these contributions, Bill has taught me several important lessons about college leadership and life. The first lesson I learned from him is that it was perfectly acceptable to conduct an impromptu interview with a vice presidential candidate in a Burger King over a Whopper in an obscure little town in Michigan. These are exactly the circumstances where I first met Bill Sederburg. His relaxed, yet effective, style of leadership has always been a great reminder to me that we should remember to have fun and enjoy the students and people with whom we work along the way. I appreciate many other words of counsel I have received from him, such as, “don’t take yourself too seriously; never let yourself believe or act like you are in your last job; be grateful if you can get most of the people moving in the same direction toward your desired and worthwhile objectives; and sometimes you have to fashion an acceptable compromise to achieve the greatest possible benefit for those you are pledged to serve.” I will forever remain grateful for these Sederburg sonnets and for Bill’s friendship, leadership, and zest for life.

These reflections bring to mind a host of other mentors who have made this day possible for me. To a very large extent, my life and service are but a reflection of their influence. I was blessed from the beginning with parents who continually reminded me to be a leader and to stand for something important in life. Early on, I am sure that I gave them plenty of reasons to think otherwise. My mother encouraged me to write, and to never stop writing, because she thought I was good at it. My father was an example of supreme confidence, but compassionate understanding. His example continues to propel me forward despite his untimely passing more than fifteen years ago. My older brother has been an unerring friend and example of stability and goodness worthy of emulation.

My wife, Elva, who many of you are coming to know, is an extraordinary example of sacrificial service in my life. Aside from being my closest friend and confidante for more than 40 years, she more than anyone has taught me the importance of foregoing personal comforts to assist in blessing the lives of others. She encourages me on a daily basis to be a good person and do all I can to help others believe in their own intrinsic value and the contributions they can make to the uplifting things of life.

I would be remiss not to mention some of the extraordinary professional educators who have inspired me: Dan Jones, the dynamic political science professor who ignited the passion of my own learning so many years ago. J.D. Williams, my graduate school advisor, who taught me how to care deeply about the students I would serve. J.D. actually remembered my name when I ran into him more than thirty years after graduation. I have been blessed with many, many exceptional colleagues who have supported me and taught me how to move forward in difficult and challenging circumstances. Several of them are here today. I am grateful they so consistently believed in me, even at times when I was not sure about myself. I
have also had the opportunity to work closely with several other college and university presidents. In them, I have had great examples of hard work, leadership, intellectual engagement, and compassion. My deep and abiding gratitude for each of these individuals defies full expression through any simple words I might offer here today.

Albert Schweitzer once advised, “At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us.” Those I have mentioned and many more share in a portion of the warmth I am experiencing today.

Allow me to return now to the celebration of great values that undergird Jamestown Community College. Everyone in attendance today deserves to know that the clear message I have received over the last ten weeks, in assuming the role of president, is that Jamestown Community College is a beloved and treasured asset in the lives and communities it is pledged to serve. Hundreds of individuals in Cattaraugus and Chautauqua counties and beyond have gone out of their way to express their feelings to me about the power and promise of this exceptional college. Each testimonial stands as a firm realization of the dreams and aspirations of the visionaries and talented professionals who have, to this point, pioneered the pathways of institutional success. Today, we are the fortunate and intended beneficiaries of their incredible foresight, wisdom, and sacrifice. More importantly, however, their lives should serve as a clarion call encouraging each of us to deploy a full measure of our own talent, energy, and intellect in furthering this important work for the benefit of a new generation of learners.

I feel certain that James Prendergast, namesake of the Jamestown community and Jamestown Community College, would be very proud of the outcomes that his pioneering experiment continues to manifest today. According to Crocker and Currie, Prendergast “advocated schooling for all the children of the [Jamestown] settlement and, for many years, bore the entire cost of that education, providing the facilities, teachers, and supplies.” (Kathleen Crocker and Jane Currie, Images of America: Jamestown, 2004). Prendergast’s example of personal sacrifice for the cause of education has been passed down through the decades and remains an important and valued characteristic of the Jamestown community. JCC has long been the beneficiary of willing workers and a strong philanthropic environment.

In 1895, Jamestown Mayor Eleazer Green noted the importance of education to the community pioneers when he stated, “Almost without exception, they were well educated, of high character, and of excellent reputations in the community whence they came. They were strong and vigorous physically and intellectually; they were industrious, persevering, determined. They came with a fixed purpose – to transform the wilderness into a community of comfortable…homes for themselves and their posterity.”

I have witnessed many of these same characteristics in the current students, faculty, and staff of the college as I have circulates throughout its several environments. The college is a strong contributor to its societal and economic environments because those associated with it are “industrious, persevering, determined, and intellectually vigorous.” They have a similar “fixed purpose” to maintain and expand the comfort and quality of life for all around. Each individual seems to understand the importance of his or her personal effort and contribution to the benefit of the whole.

Today, we owe a profound debt of gratitude to those who have so capably led this institution since its inaugural year in 1950. I am grateful for Presidents Ring, Bolman, Baisler, Seager, Benke, Davies, and DeCinque. These individuals have guided Jamestown Community College with skill and mastery through a wide and exhilarating range of challenges and opportunities. I have enjoyed hearing some of the stories emanating from these administrations, though I am not sure whether they comfort me or add to the consternation that any leader feels upon taking the reins of such a dynamic enterprise. I am particularly
grateful for the efforts of Dr. Greg DeCinque and his executive team who so capably guided the college through the last 19 years. We have all benefited from their skillful leadership in securing the stability and opportunities that the college enjoys today.

Leadership in higher education is increasingly vital in that the value and importance of acquiring a college education is constantly under scrutiny and being questioned by some today. Articles in national publications, discussions in state legislatures, and online chats continually chip away at the confidence we have in our institutions of higher learning. In response, The Chronicle of Higher Education recently published the answers of several scholars to the question, “What’s College For?” Some of their thoughtful replies warrant our careful attention and remind us of the essential nature of our cause here at Jamestown Community College.

Carolyn Martin, President of Amherst College, penned:

College is for the development of intelligence in its multiple forms. College is the opportunity for achievement, measured against high standards. College is preparation for the complexities of a world that needs rigorous analyses of its problems and synthetic approaches to solving them. College is for learning how to think clearly, write beautifully, and put quantitative skills to use in the work of discovery. College is for the cultivation of enjoyment, in forms that go beyond entertainment or distraction, stimulating our capacity to create joy for ourselves and others. College is for leave-taking, of home and of limiting assumptions, for becoming self-directed, while socially responsible.

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College is for finding a calling, or many callings, including the calls of friendship and love. It is for the hard work of experimentation, failure, reflection, and growth. It is about the gains we make and the losses that come with them. In an age of sound bites and indignation, college is for those who are brave enough to put at risk what they think they know in recognition of the responsibility we have to one another and to those still to come.”

Phyllis M. Wise, Chancellor of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, posed the question, “Should we be preparing students for the workforce, or should we be preparing them for lifelong learning?” Her answer is:

Yes. It is important to teach students a body of knowledge – the "facts" of a discipline. One cannot pursue any profession without understanding the principles of it. Good [institutions] find a balance where students are free to form their long view of the world while at the same time acquiring the knowledge and skills to pursue a rewarding profession. We fail when we force students to choose a college experience where they must pick one or the other. We prepare students for the jobs and the careers that will emerge and grow and change in the next 20 years – perhaps in industries not yet conceived. These aren't job skills – these are life lessons.

And finally, Brenda Hellyer, Chancellor of San Jacinto College, defends the value of community colleges by stating:
In the fall of 2011, approximately 13 million such students attended 1,132 community colleges around the country. Almost two-thirds of those students were in programs to earn an associate degree and perhaps then transfer to a four-year university. The rest were enrolled in courses that could lead to certificates or technical careers.

What is college for? It is about personal and intellectual growth, about finding new dimensions of understanding, and about gaining knowledge. It is about learning and exploring.

Community colleges are uniquely positioned to be places where students can explore intellectual pursuits as well as practical career options.

That's an important combination; college is for intellectual and personal development, but it must also lead to jobs for the students who are working hard to make an investment in their future lives.

These responses underscore the critical value proposition of Jamestown Community College. I am convinced that the college and its mission have never been more important than they are today. JCC is uniquely positioned to assist and inspire students in acquiring the knowledge, skills, and abilities that are essential to their personal and professional success. The community college experience we provide here is among the richest and most satisfying opportunities available to an economically, ethnically, and socially diverse student body. In the short time I have been here, I have discerned that academic excellence at JCC is built on a foundation of exceptional teaching that engenders critical thinking and engaged learning experiences. This continues to be the anticipated outcome of all teaching activity.

I have also found Jamestown Community College to be an extraordinary laboratory for personal development and social engagement. The college is playing a pivotal role in organizing activities that encourage growth of the whole person. I am impressed with the comprehensive and carefully designed set of student services that are available to help students overcome deficiencies and promote individual and collective strengths within the student body. I am confident that relationships and successful patterns of behavior developed while attending JCC will enhance the whole of our students’ subsequent life experiences.

The college continues to play an extremely valuable role in strengthening the cultural and economic wellsprings of the communities we serve. The accessible and affordable education we provide appears to be elevating the creative thinking and value systems of the population, generally. The college’s highly responsive academic, career, and technical education and job-training programs have been and will continue to be attractive incentives for current and potential employers. Cultural programs are enriching the community and providing a heightened sense of connectedness and holistic goodness for the benefit of all.

These noteworthy characteristics are the result of the hard work and careful leadership exerted by many who are here today and others who have gone before. They form the solid and substantial foundation we need to engage a whole host of societal challenges and opportunities that are currently at our door. For example, personal and family value systems that bolster our social, political, economic, and education systems need to be strengthened and supported. Preparation for college-level study must be enhanced. Our enrollment opportunities must be extended to a deeper and wider range of participants. Higher levels of public and private resources are needed to achieve our critical goals and objectives. Teaching methods and delivery of student services must evolve rapidly to keep pace with the technological revolution that is sweeping every social and economic sector in which we are engaged. And, we must be full partners and
participants in achieving an economic revitalization of the communities in which we live. These crucial realities form the frontier against which we will test our mettle and forge the enduring contribution of our particular legacy to the generations that follow.

After spending ten weeks at the helm of Jamestown Community College, I am more optimistic and encouraged than ever that our pages of history will fully complement the inspirations of days gone by. “Why such optimism?” you ask. My answer is this: we have within our reach all the crucial ingredients needed for success. We have some of the best students that New York or the world has to offer. The members of our faculty are experienced, professional, and willing to extend themselves to do all that is necessary to achieve successful student outcomes. The JCC staff is innovative and energetic in fashioning services that support and strengthen the learning experience for students. Our boards are filled with competent and caring individuals who are willing to sacrifice time, talent, and substance to underwrite the important work that must be done. We also have tremendous industrial, business, and education partners in the community that rely upon us and who are willing to put their shoulders to the wheel in achieving our collective goals and ambitions. Furthermore, we have the support of our donors and financial sponsors along with the backing of SUNY, the world’s largest education system.

In addition to our people and partners, we have the Unified Student Assistance (USA) Scholarship program, a pillar of college strength for decades. This fund will need to be fortified through the support of all our partners, but its impact will continue to provide the leavening agent of institutional success for many years to come. Our physical facilities are likewise exceptional, well cared for, and up to the task of taking us into a very productive future.

Nevertheless, these crucial ingredients may not adequately explain my optimism. Perhaps, the full explanation can only be found in the answer to the one set of questions I have been asked more than any other since arriving in New York, “Why are you here? Why did you come all the way across the country to work in western New York with a set of people you don’t know in a land that can sometimes seem a little obscure and past its prime, with a reputation for being very snowy and often quite cold?” The answer is simple, “I believe in what we do!”

I have tested the hearts and minds of the JCC faculty and staff over the last several months. I have looked into the bright eyes of our aspiring students. I have mingled with leaders across our two counties who are full of hope and who have the express desire to move their communities forward. And, I have begun to learn about the extraordinary educational opportunities that have been built here at the college. In all of this, I can sense the unmistakable and transcendent seeds of yet greater tomorrows for Jamestown Community College. This singular expression of commitment to providing a transformative educational experience for the lives of those we have the privilege to serve is a common bond I share with all of you. Hence, together, “we clearly believe in the power and the promise of what we do!”

In conclusion, allow me to share with you a portion of an email I received just this week. This letter is a communication between recent JCC graduate Brittany VanDervoort and her professor, Jackie Crisman. I think it speaks volumes about the future of Jamestown Community College:

Dr. Crisman:

I was thinking, I want to go to my old high school and others in the surrounding area and talk about the biotechnology program at JCC. I feel like many students here [at the high school] don't realize the opportunities that are available there [at JCC]…
I feel very privileged to have gone through your biotechnology program. I always had an interest in biology, but I really had no idea what kind of career in biology that I wanted to pursue. Somehow, I serendipitously stumbled into the biotechnology program. I instantly knew that was the direction I wanted to take in life. As I progressed through the program and became more involved in research through my internship I started realizing that there were way more opportunities out there than I was previously unaware of. Every time we go to a conference and are actively involved in the scientific community I am reminded of the goals that I am working towards… Getting out there around other scientists and talking about science always reignites that inspiration that I have deep down inside of me to continue working hard because there actually is an obtainable goal in mind that will allow me to have the life I want and do what I love to do.

I feel very fortunate to have found a career path that I enjoy so much and I want to share this with others. There has to be somebody else out there that was feeling the same way I was in high school. I really had no direction and was not aware of the vast number of opportunities that there actually are out there. You just have to look for them. You have to step out of your comfort zone and try new things. Sometimes all it takes is just someone to point you in the right direction…

So, basically what I am trying to say here is that I want to talk with high school students in my area about the biotechnology program at JCC. I plan on putting together a presentation during Christmas break when I will have some extra time to do so…What do you think?

[signed] Peaches :)

This letter is an expression of the driving motivation and deep sense of gratitude that characterize those associated with Jamestown Community College. It provides unsolicited evidence that the JCC promise of connecting, challenging, and caring has etched its influence on the hearts and self-motivated behaviors of our most important and enduring assets, the students. Such examples are to me a simple, yet profound, reminder that what we do truly matters. Our profession and craft play an essential role in elevating life’s circumstance for each individual we serve and, thereby, for the society in which we live. Hence, our work provides a critical and indispensible link to securing a real hope for a better and brighter tomorrow.

So, today, I pledge myself to all of the tasks, opportunities, and challenges associated with leading this great institution forward. I hereby commit to all within the sound of my voice, and beyond, that I will work hard, listen intently, collaborate abundantly, and lead with that level of “vigorous” energy that has come to characterize the whole of this community. To this end, I look forward to establishing a great vision and association with each of you as, together, we extend the power and the promise of a Jamestown Community College education to our next generation of aspiring students. I hope you will likewise enthusiastically commit to join me in pursuing and advancing such a noble and enduring JCC cause.

Thank you!